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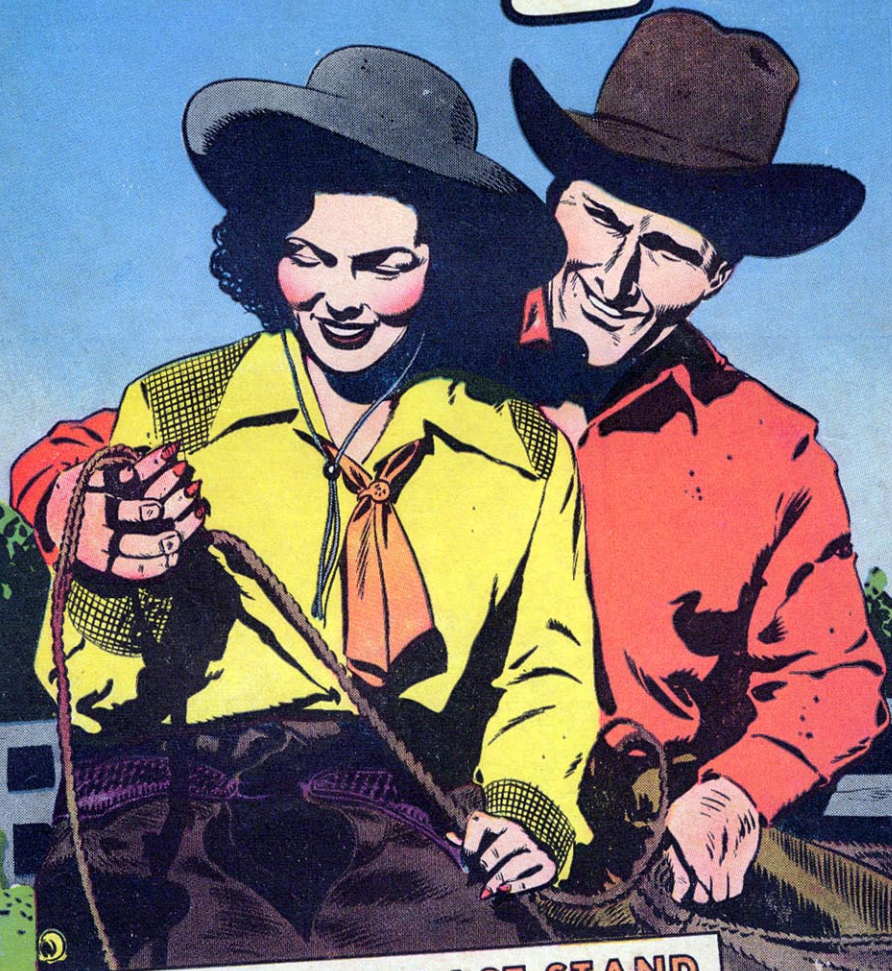
COWBOY LOVE

A CHARLTON PUBLICATION

Cowboy Love

Nº 28

10¢



IN THIS ISSUE.. LOVE'S LAST STAND
• THE HERMIT'S DAUGHTER



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Check the Kind of Body YOU Want! RIGHT IN THE COUPON BELOW

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Lacking in confidence?

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COWBOY LOVE

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Volume 1, Number 28

February, 1955

COWBOY LOVE

The following outstanding magazines are easily identified on their covers by the words A CHARLTON PUBLICATION

ATOMIC MOUSE ★ BADGE OF JUSTICE ★ BLUE BEETLE ★ COWBOY LOVE ★ COWBOY WEST-ERN ★ DANGER and ADVENTURE ★ FUNNY ANIMALS—MERRY MAILMAN ★ GABBY HAYES ★ HOT RODS and RACING CARS ★ LASH LaRUE ★ MONTE HALE ★ MY LITTLE MARGIE ★ ROCKY LANE ★ SIX-GUN HEROES ★ SOLDIER and MARINE ★ SPACE ADVENTURES—ROCKY JONES, SPACE RANGER ★ SWEETHEARTS ★ TEX RITTER ★ This Is SUSPENSE ★ TRUE LIFE SECRETS ★ TV TEENS—DON WINSLOW of the NAVY ★ WIN-A-PRIZE ★ ZOO FUNNIES, NYOKA, JUNGLE GIRL



Every effort is made to insure that these comic magazines contain the highest quality of wholesome entertainment.

Alfred I. Fago Executive Editor

LOVE'S LAST STAND!

BREATHTAKINGLY BEAUTIFUL.... A THING OF PROUD, UNCONQUERABLE SPIRIT... THAT WAS EDIE AND WAYNE LOVED HER FOR ALL OF THAT. THEN AN OMINOUS SHADOW DREW OVER THEIR LOVE AND THREATENED TO STIFLE THE LAST BREATH OF THEIR GENTLE ROMANCE BUT THERE IS NO STRENGTH GREATER THAN TRUE LOVE... AND THEIR HEARTS UNITED IN A SHIELD THAT SEARING BULLETS COULD NOT PENETRATE!

THE SILENT BLACKNESS OF NIGHT CLOAKED THE LITTLE TOWN OF LODESTONE AS WAYNE HART SLOWLY RODE THROUGH ITS STREETS. TO HIM IT SEEMED LIKE ALL THE OTHER FRONTIER TOWNS HE'D EVER RIDDEN INTO, FROM THE PANHANDLE TO THE BORDER....

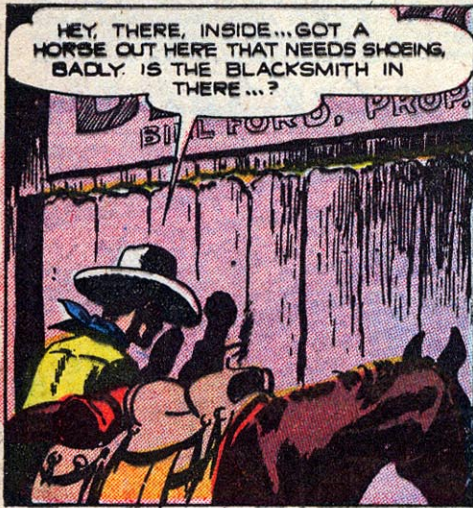
WHERE IN SAM HILL DO THEY HIDE THE BLACKSMITH SHOP IN THIS TOWN? THOUGH IT'S A REALLY LATE HOUR TO EXPECT ONE TO BE STILL OPEN.

WE'LL HAVE TO GET YOU NEW SHOES IN THE MORNING, SHAGGY, IF WE DON'T FIND HIM OPEN TONIGHT.

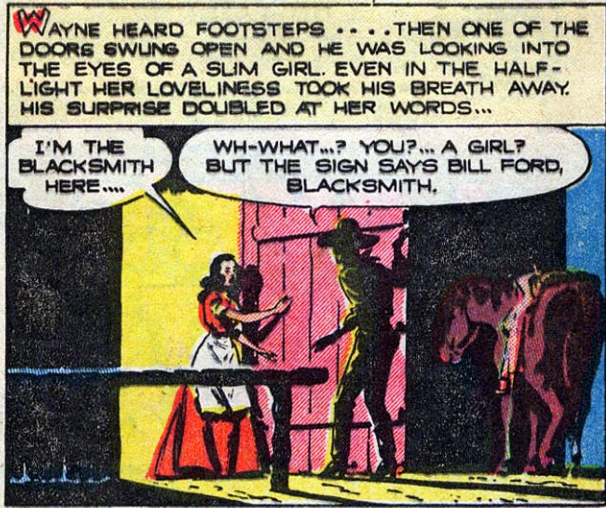
JUST THEN, THE TALL COWBOY'S KEEN EYES SPOTTED THE HUGE HORSESHOE THAT WAS THE TRADE-MARK OF ALL BLACKSMITHS. HE REINED TO A HALT BEFORE THE CLOSED DOORS OF THE SHOP....

BY GOLLY... THERE'S A LIGHT INSIDE. WE'LL GET YOU SOME NEW SHOES TONIGHT AT THAT, MAYBE!





HEY, THERE, INSIDE...GOT A HORSE OUT HERE THAT NEEDS SHOEING, BADLY. IS THE BLACKSMITH IN THERE...?



I'M THE BLACKSMITH HERE....

WH-WHAT...? YOU?... A GIRL? BUT THE SIGN SAYS BILL FORD, BLACKSMITH.



BILL FORD WAS MY UNCLE. HE'S NOT... NOT HERE, ANY MORE. I'M EDIE FORD. I RUN HIS SHOP, NOW BRING YOUR HORSE IN, MISTER

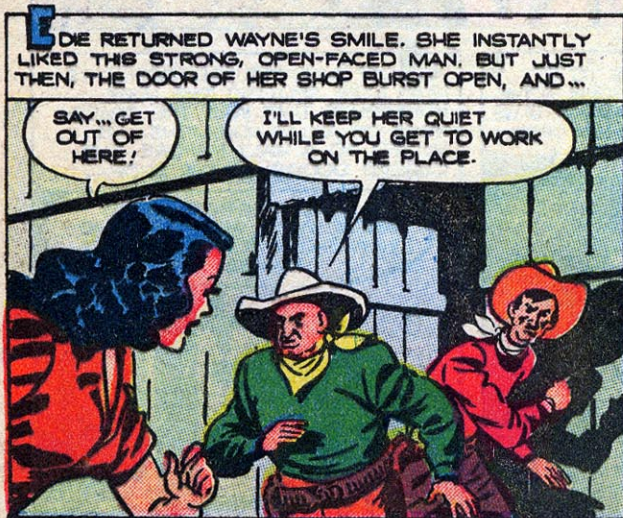
WELL, I'LL BE HORNSVOGGLED!! NOW I'VE SEEN EVERYTHING!

E DIE FORD WATCHED THE TALL STRANGER TIE UP HIS STEED. IN THE LIGHT OF THE SHOP HER EYES TOOK IN HIS CLEAN, CHISELED FEATURES, HIS POWERFUL SHOULDERS. HERE WAS A MAN AS STRONG AND TRUE AS THE HILLS OF THE WEST...



NEW-COMER IN TOWN, AREN'T YOU, MISTER?

YEP, JUST GOT IN. WAYNE HART IS THE NAME. MOST FOLKS CALL ME WAYNE I'M NOT A FORMAL HOMBRE.



SAY...GET OUT OF HERE!

I'LL KEEP HER QUIET WHILE YOU GET TO WORK ON THE PLACE.



LET GO OF ME AND GET OUT! I SAID LET G...!!

SHUT UP! YOU'VE STALLED US ENOUGH. NOW WE'RE GOING TO HELP YOU MAKE UP YOUR MIND!

WAYNE'S SURPRISE AT THE INTRUDERS' SUDDEN ATTACK, VANISHED WITH THE BLOW THAT STRUCK EDIE FORD'S LOVELY CHEEK. HIS ANGER FLARING, HE STRUCK OUT, HIS MUSCLES UNCOILING LIKE STEEL SPRINGS...



AS EDIE WATCHED, HER HEART TREMBLING, SHE SAW THE TWO MEN FIGHT BACK AT WAYNE. THE TALL, POWERFUL STRANGER BATTLED WITH A COLD, SKILFUL FURY... WEAVING, DUCKING, AND ALWAYS LASHING OUT. HIS FISTS STRUCK AGAIN AND AGAIN...



AS EDIE STOOD BEFORE HIM, WAYNE SAW THE SUDDEN TREMBLING OF HER SHOULDERS, SAW WEARINESS SUDDENLY COME INTO HER EYES. HE FELT A STRANGE, STRONG TENDERNESS FOR THIS GIRL...

SAY, YOU'RE SHAKING...! YOU'RE FRIGHTENED!

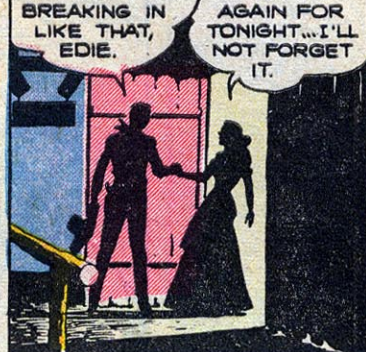
I...I GUESS SO, FRIGHTENED AND TIRED...SO TERRIBLY TIRED!

BETTER LET ME TAKE YOU HOME, EDIE. YOU NEED REST.

THANKS, WAYNE, BUT I LIVE RIGHT UPSTAIRS OVER THE SHOP. I DO NEED SLEEP, I GUESS.

GOOD! AND TOMORROW, I'D APPRECIATE YOUR TELLING ME WHAT MADE THOSE CRITTERS COME BREAKING IN LIKE THAT, EDIE.

I WILL TELL YOU THE WHOLE STORY IN THE MORNING. AND WAYNE, THANKS AGAIN FOR TONIGHT...I'LL NOT FORGET IT.



AFTER THE TALL COWBOY HAD VANISHED INTO THE NIGHT EDIE KNEW HOW VERY TRUE HER WORDS HAD BEEN. SHE WOULD NOT FORGET...THE QUICKENING OF HER HEART WHEN HER EYES MET HIS, TOLD HER SHE COULD NOT FORGET!

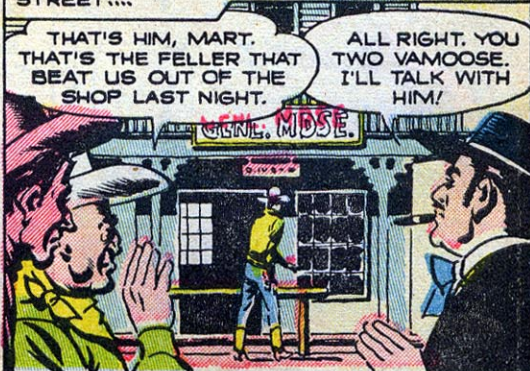
HE'S NICE...VERY NICE. I HOPE HE'LL STAY HERE IN LODGESTONE.



WAYNE FOUND A ROOM IN THE TOWN'S ONE HOTEL AND WENT TO SLEEP DREAMING OF A GIRL WITH EYES AS BRIGHT AS THE FIRES OF THE FORGE SHE WORKED OVER. THEN EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, AS HE STRODE DOWN MAIN STREET...

THAT'S HIM, MART. THAT'S THE FELLER THAT BEAT US OUT OF THE SHOP LAST NIGHT.

ALL RIGHT. YOU TWO VAMOOSE. I'LL TALK WITH HIM!



HOLD ON, THERE PARTNER. MIND IF I SPEAK A PIECE WITH YOU?



MY NAME'S MART CRAILER. YOUR HANDLE IS...?

WAYNE HART, MISTER.

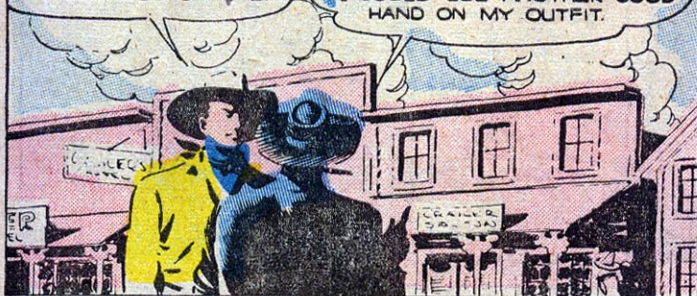


COWBOY LOVE

WAYNE LET HIS EYES TAKE IN THE OTHER MAN'S SQUARE BUILD, HIS WELL-CUT CLOTHES. THOUGH MART CRAILER'S SMILE WAS GENIAL, FRIENDLY, HE HAD THE MANNERS OF A MAN USED TO HAVING HIS WAY....

I'VE BEEN SEEING YOUR NAME ON MOST OF THE PLACES IN TOWN. I RECKON YOU PRETTY WELL RUN THINGS AROUND HERE.

OH, I SUPPOSE I DO, IN A WAY. BUT I ALSO HEARD ABOUT YOU... ABOUT THAT FIGHT YOU HAD LAST NIGHT. I COULD USE ANOTHER GOOD HAND ON MY OUTFIT.



HOW ABOUT SIGNING UP WITH ME? THE CHORES WON'T BE TOO HEAVY AND I PAY TOP WAGES.



WAYNE THOUGHT QUICKLY AS MART CRAILER WENT ON TALKING. THE OFFER SOUNDED GOOD, SO...

ALL RIGHT, CRAILER...IT'S A DEAL. I'M WORKING FOR YOU.

FINE! COME TO MY OFFICE IN THE HOTEL LATER AND MEET THE REST OF MY BOYS. I'LL BE EXPECTING YOU THERE.



WAYNE WALKED ON, THEN. WHEN HE REACHED THE BLACKSMITH SHOP HE STOOD SILENTLY AT THE DOOR FOR A MOMENT, WATCHING EDIE. SHE WAS EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN IN HIS DREAMS...

HELLO, THERE.

OH, WAYNE...! COME IN, I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU TO COME.



HOW ARE YOU THIS MORNING, EDIE... FEELING BETTER?

YES, THINGS ARE ALWAYS BETTER AFTER A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEP.



NOW, HOW ABOUT TELLING ME WHY THOSE HOMERES TRIED TO WRECK YOUR PLACE LAST NIGHT?

THEY WERE MART CRAILER'S MEN. CRAILER RUNS THIS TOWN BY TERROR. HE AND HIS THUGS MAKE EVERY STOREKEEPER AND MERCHANT PAY PART OF THEIR EARNINGS TO HIM, CLAIMING HE PROTECTS THEM FOR THAT.



MY UNCLE, BILL FORD, REFUSED TO BOW TO CRAILER AND HE WAS KILLED FOR IT. EVERYONE KNOWS IT WAS CRAILER WHO DID IT, BUT FOLKS HEREABOUTS ARE AFRAID TO DEFY HIM!



WAYNE'S THOUGHTS RACED AS EDIE'S STORY UNFOLDED. HE'D JUST AGREED TO WORK FOR MART CRAILER, AND NOW HE WAS HEARING THIS. COULD HE TELL EDIE?

AND SO, WHEN I TOOK OVER FOR UNCLE BILL, THEY WANTED ME TO PAY UP. BUT I REFUSED. I ALWAYS WILL.

I COULD QUIT CRAILER NOW, BUT IF I STAY WITH HIM MAYBE I CAN FIND SOME WAY TO HELP EDIE... TO AT LEAST PROTECT HER!



AND FROM THE COLD HATRED OF EDIE'S VOICE AS SHE SPOKE OF CRAILER, WAYNE KNEW HE COULD NOT TELL HER HE WAS GOING TO WORK FOR THIS MAN. SHE WOULD NOT UNDERSTAND. BESIDES, HOW COULD SHE KNOW THAT HE HAD COME TO CARE FOR HER SO MUCH...SO SOON?

SO THAT'S THE STORY, EDIE. YOU'RE VERY BRAVE TO TRY AND STAND UP AGAINST SOMEONE LIKE MART CRAILER... ALL ALONE.

BRAVE? NO, WAYNE, IT'S THE ONLY RIGHT THING TO DO. BESIDES, I WAS HOPING THAT, AFTER LAST NIGHT, YOU MIGHT...WELL, STAY IN TOWN AND...



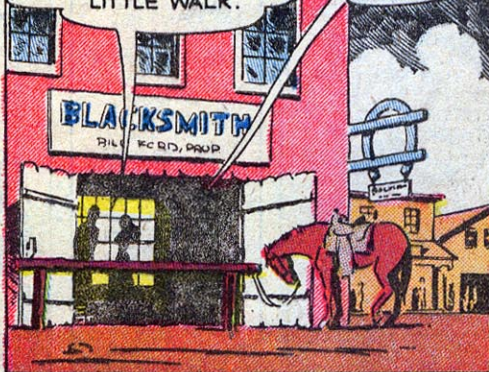
...HELP YOU? YES, EDIE... I'M STAYING AWHILE HERE IN LODGESTONE AND I'LL HELP YOU ALL I CAN.

THANK YOU, WAYNE... THAT'S WONDERFUL NEWS. IT'S WHAT I... I HOPED YOU'D SAY.



AND NOW, I'VE GOT TO GET ALONG. HOW ABOUT MY COMING BACK WHEN YOU CLOSE TONIGHT. MAYBE WE COULD TAKE A LITTLE WALK.

FINE, WAYNE... I'D LOVE THAT. GOODYE, NOW... TILL TONIGHT.



WAYNE WENT STRAIGHT TO CRAILER'S OFFICE AFTER HE LEFT EDIE. THERE WERE OTHERS THERE WITH CRAILER. AMONG THEM, WAYNE SAW THE TWO MEN HE'D FOUGHT THE NIGHT BEFORE. THEY WERE ALL A HARD, COLD, RUTHLESS LOT...

MY BOYS TELL ME YOU WERE VISITING EDIE FORD. NOW THAT YOU KNOW HOW I RUN THINGS AROUND HERE, DO YOU HAVE ANY OBJECTIONS?

NOPE! NO OBJECTIONS.



AND SPEAKING OF EDIE FORD, I'LL HAVE THE BOYS FINISH TONIGHT WHAT YOU INTERRUPTED LAST NIGHT. NO ONE HOLDS OUT ON MART CRAILER!

CRAILER'S TOO POWERFUL FOR ME TO STOP JUST LIKE THAT! I NEED TIME TO FIND A WAY TO HELP EDIE. BUT, MEANWHILE, I'VE GOT TO DELAY CRAILER.



SURE, DO WHATEVER YOU LIKE! IN FACT, I'VE GOT AN IDEA THAT MIGHT HELP YOU OUT WITH HER.

LET'S HEAR IT.



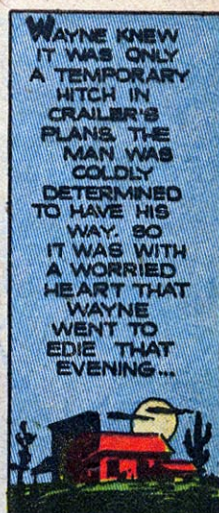


SHE'S GONE REAL SWEET ON ME SINCE LAST NIGHT. I WAS THINKING IT'D BE REAL EASY FOR ME TO PLAY UP TO HER AND TALK HER INTO CO-OPERATING WITH YOU. NO ROUGH STUFF... NO TROUBLE... JUST SMOOTH TALK.

HMM! NOT A BAD IDEA, HART.



ALL RIGHT... GET HER TO AGREE TO DEAL WITH US. REPORT TO ME EVERY DAY.

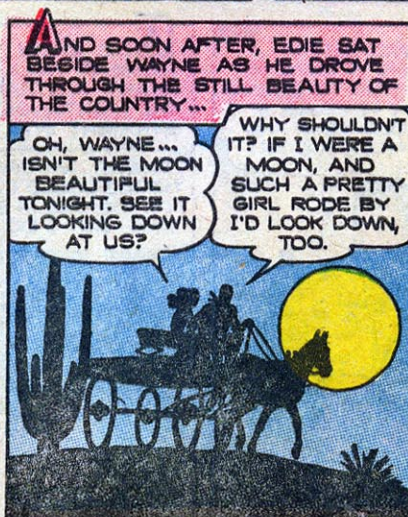


WAYNE KNEW IT WAS ONLY A TEMPORARY HITCH IN CRAILER'S PLANS. THE MAN WAS COLDLY DETERMINED TO HAVE HIS WAY. SO IT WAS WITH A WORRIED HEART THAT WAYNE WENT TO EDIE THAT EVENING...



READY TO CLOSE, EDIE? I HIRED A BUCKBOARD. THOUGHT WE MIGHT TAKE A LITTLE RIDE.

ALL READY, WAYNE. I'LL RUN UP AND CHANGE AND BE RIGHT WITH YOU.



AND SOON AFTER, EDIE SAT BESIDE WAYNE AS HE DROVE THROUGH THE STILL BEAUTY OF THE COUNTRY...

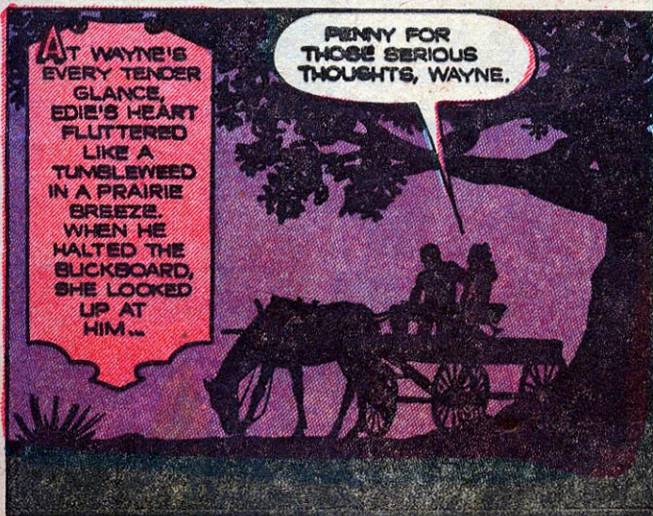
OH, WAYNE... ISN'T THE MOON BEAUTIFUL TONIGHT. SEE IT LOOKING DOWN AT US?

WHY SHOULDN'T IT? IF I WERE A MOON, AND SUCH A PRETTY GIRL RODE BY, I'D LOOK DOWN, TOO.



YOU SAY SUCH NICE THINGS FOR A COWBOY WHO HAS RIDDEN THE TRAILS WITH SILENCE AS HIS ONLY COMPANION.

I CAN'T HELP SAYING NICE THINGS WHEN I LOOK AT YOU, EDIE.



AT WAYNE'S EVERY TENDER GLANCE, EDIE'S HEART FLUTTERED LIKE A TUMBLEWEED IN A PRAIRIE BREEZE. WHEN HE HALTED THE BUCKBOARD, SHE LOOKED UP AT HIM...

PENNY FOR THOSE SERIOUS THOUGHTS, WAYNE.

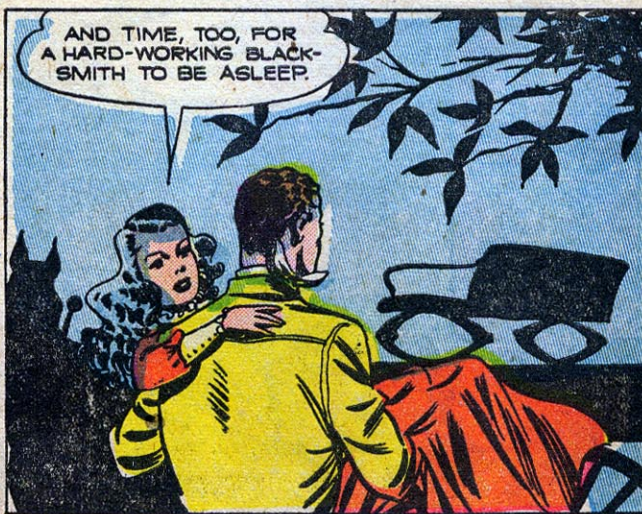


I WAS THINKING ABOUT MART CRAILER, AND YOU, AND YOUR SHOP. HE'S TOO POWERFUL, EDIE, TO FIGHT... AND YOU'RE TOO BEAUTIFUL TO BE HURT.

OH, THAT'S WHAT YOU WERE THINKING ABOUT. WELL, I DON'T CARE HOW POWERFUL HE IS. I'LL NEVER GIVE IN TO HIS DEMANDS, WAYNE.

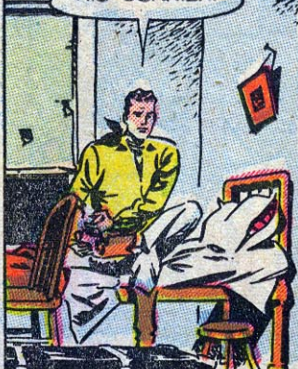


THEY WALKED A FEW PAGES AND LOOKED UP AT THE MAJESTIC EXPANSE OF WESTERN SKY. THEN THEIR EYES MET AND WAYNE'S ARMS WERE ABOUT EDIE, DRAWING HER TO HIM... AND THERE, UNDER THE SPARKLING EYES OF A MILLION STARS, THEIR LIPS MET...



LATER THAT NIGHT, WAYNE THOUGHT OF HIS LOVE FOR EDIE. BUT HE ALSO THOUGHT OF THE FORBODING SHADOW THAT HUNG OVER HER HEAD, EVER-PRESENT, EVER-THREATENING... A SHADOW CALLED MART CRAILER!

I'VE GOT TO MAKE EDIE GIVE IN TO CRAILER FOR A WHILE... AT LEAST. UNTIL I CAN THINK OF A WAY TO BLOCK HIM AND HIS GUNMEN.



BUT IN THE DAYS THAT FOLLOWED, EDIE PROVED AS STUBBORN AS SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL. AND ONE AFTERNOON CRAILER HALTED WAYNE ON THE STREET...

NOTHING DOING WITH HER YET, EH? LOOKS AS IF YOUR IDEA ISN'T WORKING OUT, HART. I'LL JUST HAVE TO GET ROUGH WITH HER.

THINGS TAKE TIME. SHE'S BREAKING DOWN. JUST GIVE ME A LITTLE MORE TIME AND I'LL HAVE HER EATING OUT OF THE PALM OF YOUR HAND.



BUT YOU SHOULDN'T TALK TO ME OUT HERE IN THE OPEN. LOOK THERE'S BURNS, THE SADDLEMAKER... HE'S SEEN US. IF IT GETS AROUND TO EDIE I'M WORKING FOR YOU IT'LL RUIN EVERYTHING!

GUESS IT MIGHT, BUT YOU'D BETTER GET HER TO COOPERATE, SOON, OR ELSE...



WAYNE REALIZED CRAILER WAS LOSING WHAT LITTLE PATIENCE HE HAD. BUT THAT EVENING, IN THE SOFT CIRCLE OF EDIE'S ARMS, THE WORLD... EVERYTHING... STOOD STILL...

THESE HAVE BEEN HAPPY DAYS, WAYNE! THE HAPPIEST OF MY LIFE!



YES, EDIE WAS HAPPY IN WAYNE'S ARMS... LOVE AND PEACE IN HER HEART. BUT IN WAYNE'S HEART THERE WAS NO PEACE, ONLY THE TORMENTING THOUGHT OF CRAILER'S WARNING...

BUT I CAN'T HELP THINKING ABOUT CRAILER. FOR YOUR OWN SAKE, FOR OUR SAKE, GIVE IN TO HIM FOR NOW, AT LEAST.

OH, WAYNE, DON'T ASK THAT AGAIN. I'M NEVER GOING TO DEAL WITH MART CRAILER. WE'VE GONE OVER IT A DOZEN TIMES BEFORE.

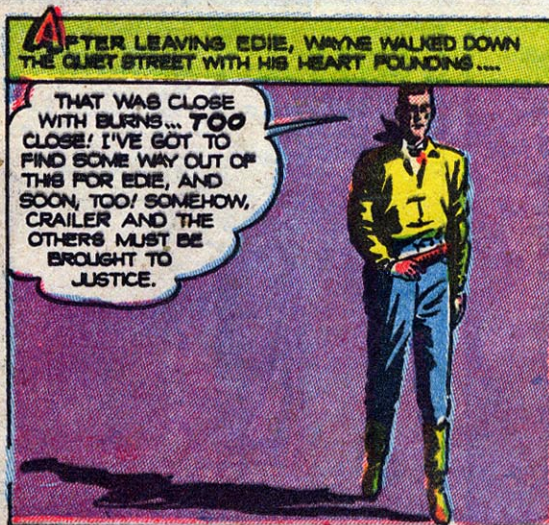
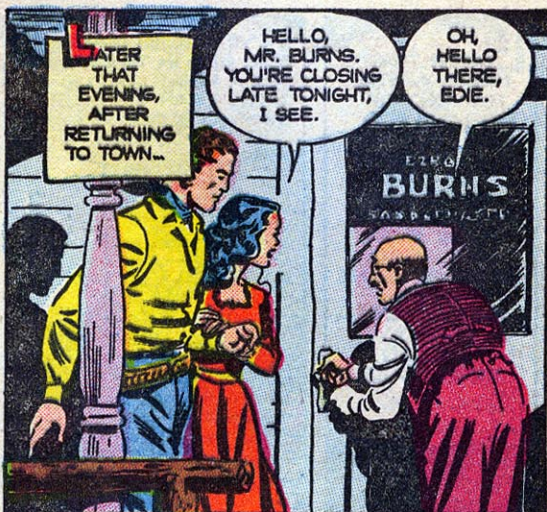


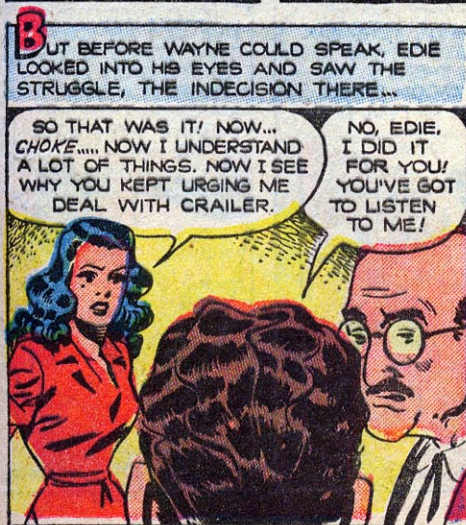
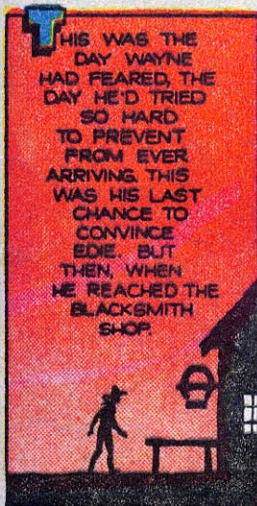
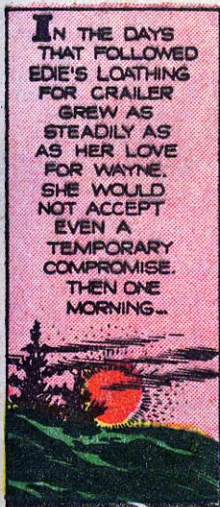
MAYBE IF I TAKE A STAND, OTHER FOLKS IN TOWN WILL GET UP THE COURAGE TO RESIST HIM.

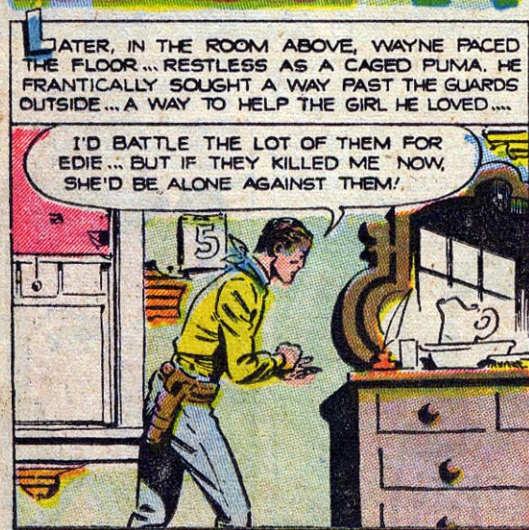
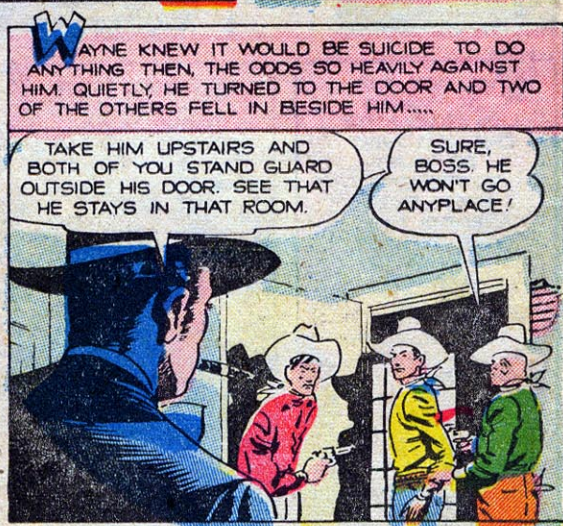
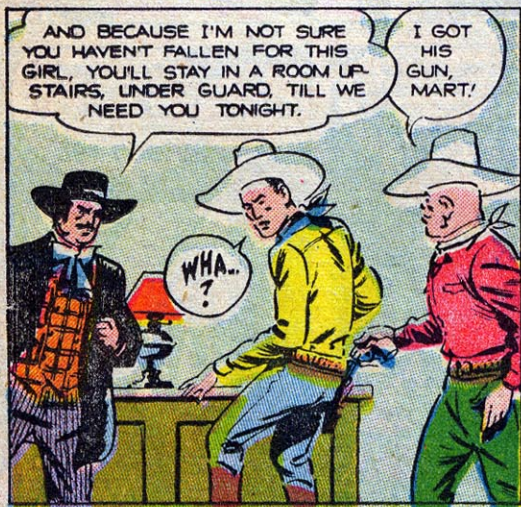
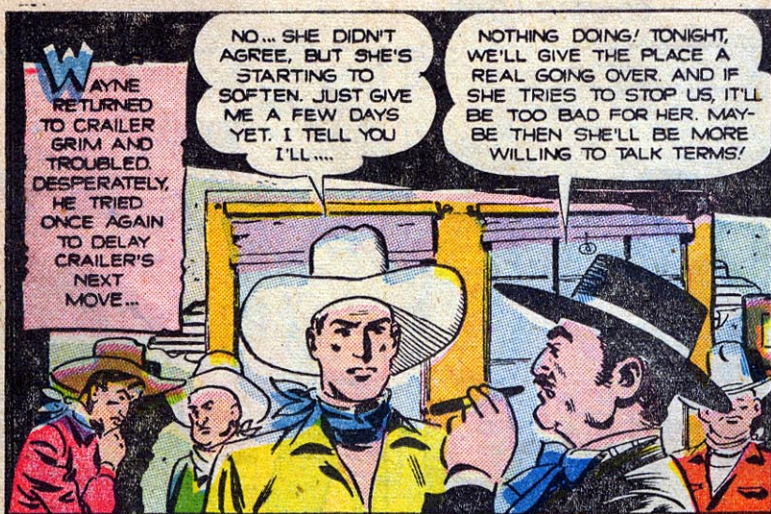
YOU'RE RIGHT FOR FEELING THIS WAY... BUT THERE MIGHT BE A BETTER WAY TO SETTLE A SCORE WITH CRAILER.



COWBOY LOVE

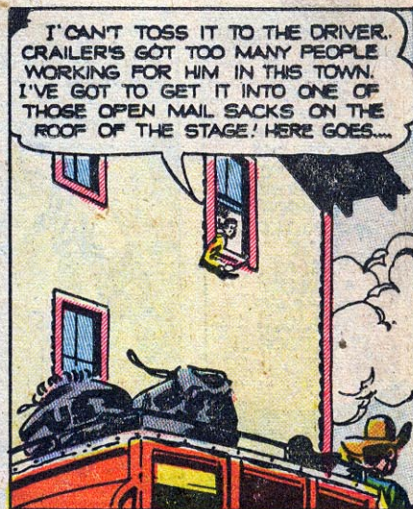








FEVERISHLY, WAYNE SCRIBBLED A MESSAGE ON THE BACK OF THE CALENDAR. HE WRAPPED IT AROUND A HAIRBRUSH ON THE DRESSER, TO GIVE IT WEIGHT, AND RUSHED TO THE WINDOW AS THE STAGE PASSED BENEATH...



WAYNE'S SUDDEN ACTION HAD CAUGHT THE OTHERS OFF GUARD. HE SLAMMED SHUT THE DOOR AND PULLED EDIE ASIDE AS A BULLET SLAMMED THROUGH THE DOOR...

DOWN, EDIE...IT'S CRAILER AND HIS MEN! THEY'RE OUT TO WRECK THE SHOP, AND ANYTHING OR ANYONE THAT STANDS IN THEIR WAY!



DON'T YOU SEE NOW, DARLING, THIS IS WHAT I WANTED TO PREVENT. I ONLY STAYED WITH CRAILER TO TRY TO HOLD HIM OFF!

OH, WAYNE... WAYNE, MY LOVE. I SHOULD'VE BELIEVED YOU. I'VE CRIED EVER SINCE THIS AFTERNOON...EVER SINCE YOU LEFT!



NEVER MIND THAT NOW, DARLING. DO YOU HAVE ANY GUNS HERE? WE'VE GOT TO HOLD THEM OFF AS LONG AS WE CAN!

YES, I'VE A SIX-GUN, A RIFLE AND SOME AMMUNITION UPSTAIRS. I'LL GET THEM



SECONDS LATER, ARMED WITH THE RIFLE AND THE SIX-GUN, WAYNE AND EDIE TOOK UP POSTS BY THE WINDOW OF THE SHOP AND EXCHANGED FIRE WITH CRAILER AND HIS MEN. WAYNE TURNED OFF THE LAMP TO CLOTHE THEM IN DARKNESS.

HELP WILL BE HERE SOON, EDIE. I KNOW IT WILL. JUST KEEP RETURNING THEIR FIRE.

I HOPE SO, DARLING. WE HAVEN'T MUCH AMMUNITION!



WHY...OH, WHY WON'T THE TOWN COME AND HELP US?? THEY HEAR THE SHOOTING!

THEY FIGURE CRAILER'S GOT TO WIN! BESIDES, HE'S GOT THEM TERRORIZED.



IF YOU DON'T QUIT THIS YOU'LL REALLY BE SORRY WHEN WE GET YOU... BOTH OF YOU!

CRAILER'S FURIOUS. IF HELP DOESN'T GET HERE SOON IT'LL BE CURTAINS FOR US FOR SURE!

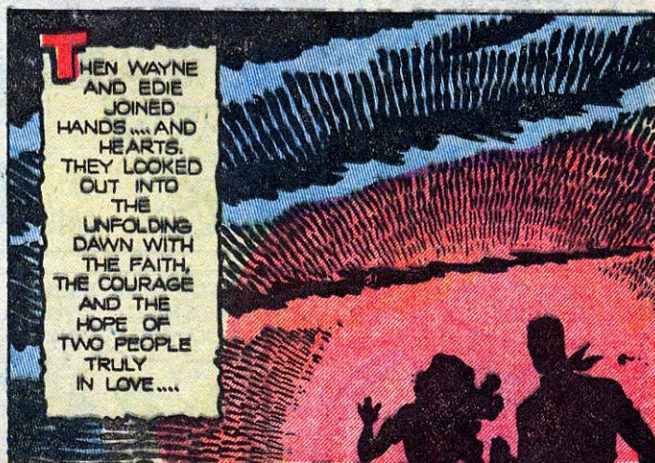
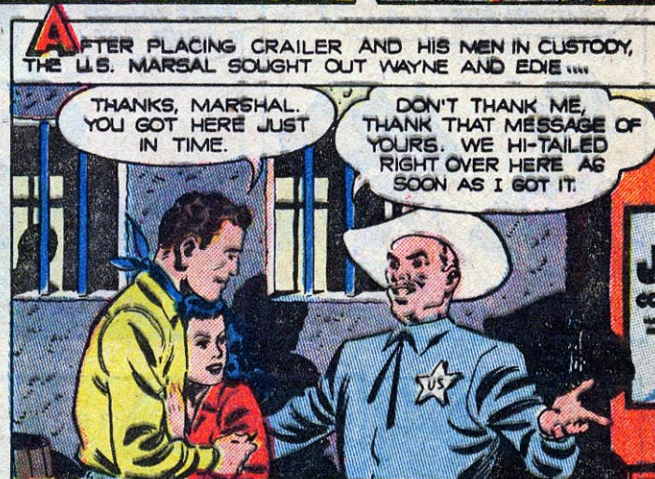
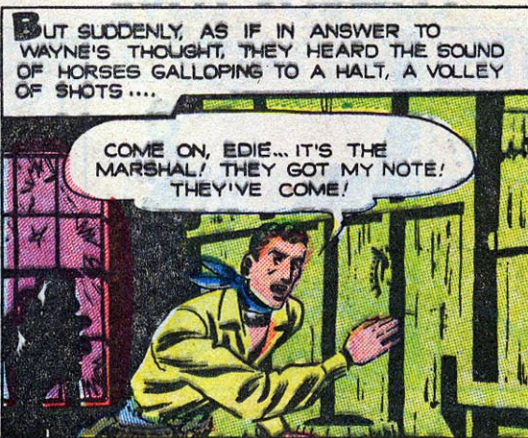


BUT WAYNE AND EDIE KEPT UP A CAREFUL, TELLINGLY AIMED DEFENSE UNTIL FINALLY...

THESE FEW SHOTS IN THE RIFLE ARE ALL THE AMMUNITION WE HAVE LEFT, EDIE.

I KNOW WAYNE. BUT WHATEVER HAPPENS... OUR HEARTS WILL BEAT OR BE STILL... TOGETHER!





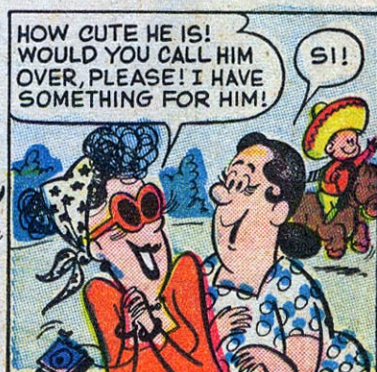
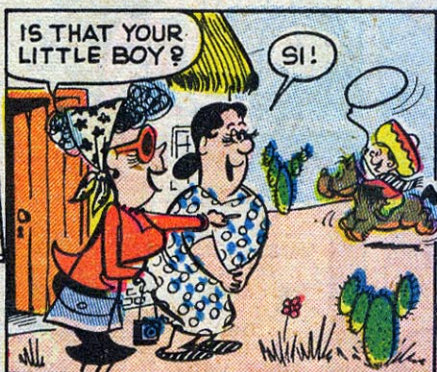
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AS THE BEAT
OF YOUR THROBBING
HEART

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COWBOY LOVE



MELODY AMES, THE PRAIRIE TROUBADOR

SONG OF THE SIX-GUN

Heading for a new job, Melody Ames, sweet singer of the sagebrush, and his companion, Pedro, stop overnight in Owl Hoot, a town dominated by Mike Maddock and his gunmen. They avoid trouble until Melody meets lovely Jennie Tobin, hotel owner and victim of Maddock's murderous greed. To Pedro's horror, Melody jumps into the fight on Jennie's side, challenging Maddock and his whole killer crew...

FOR A MOMENT Melody Ames, let his arms tighten around the slim, vibrant figure of Jennie Tobin, let his heart and his lips respond to her young eagerness. Then, reluctantly, he released her and stepped back. "Stop worrying, little Jennie," he said softly. "I've never known a bully like Mike Maddock who didn't have a core of yellow. Once that's shown up, his gun toughs will desert him in a minute. Pedro and I have had experience in cracking hard shells."

"Senor Melody is right," Pedro said sadly. "Though it is experience I could do without. We have a proverb in Mexico—*haz bien y aguardate*—which means, do a good deed and then watch out. From Senor Melody I have learned how true that is."

Jennie started to speak but the words never came. Downstairs the lobby door crashed open and booted feet tramped in. The voice of Mike Maddock came harshly up the stairway. "You had your chance to stay out of trouble, ranny. Now come down and face it."

"Coming, Maddock," Melody called. He twitched his sagging gun belt to settle it and glanced around to see that Pedro was ready. An expression of surprise crossed his lean, taut face. Pedro, his friend and companion, was nowhere in sight. He had slipped noiselessly away at the first warning tramp of boots.

"Don't go," Jennie cried in soft anguish and caught at Melody's arm.

"Stay here," Melody said gently, "and try to not worry."

He pressed her aside, letting his hands rest for a moment against her wet cheeks. Then he kissed her gently on the fore-

head, turned, and started down the narrow box stairway.

He saw the boots first, four sets of them planted wide apart, then his line of vision raised past loaded holsters and poised hands, and up at last until he was face to face with Mike Maddock and his three killers. They were fanned out, so that he could not watch all four at once, and their cold intent was clear on their faces. They had come to kill and kill swiftly, and that in itself was proof that Maddock's empire of blood was too shaky to risk opposition.

"I thought you were yellow," Melody said softly, "the first moment I looked at you. This proves it. You haven't the nerve to face a gun by yourself."

"Talk is cheap," Maddock said flatly. "Results are what I pay for and only slugs settle a thing permanently. Make your play stranger. We're going to kill you."

"That," said a soft voice from the open side window, "is one bet you would lose, Senor Maddock. For the first gun fired will be mine, amigo, and it is aimed straight at your black heart."

With a gasp of shocked rage, Maddock and his gunmen swung around. Pedro was seated carelessly in the open side window of the lobby, his drawn gun resting on one knee, covering the murderous quartet. He had run down the back stairs at the first warning, to cover the lobby from the shadows.

"You'll pay for this," Maddock choked, purple with fury. "If you think two smart saddle tramps can push Mike Maddock around, you're crazy. Gun him out, Pete. You're the fastest."

Indian Pete made a snarling noise in his throat. "Go ride a rope. If you think I'm in the market for a funeral, you're crazy."

"I salute your good judgment, Senor Pete," Pedro said. "Now if you will please drop your guns to the floor and kick them over to me, it will avoid unnecessary accidents. I believe Senor Melody has a matter to discuss with Senor Maddock, man to man."

As the cursing, raging gunmen obeyed, Melody unbuckled his own gun belt and hung it on the bannister. He grinned. "Pedro, you're a mind reader."

A gesture of Pedro's gun sent the three hired thugs back to the wall, leaving Mike Maddock alone to face Melody Ames. The murderous Boss of Owl Hoo measured his opponent's lean, hard-muscled frame and something close to fear flickered in his eyes. Then, without warning, he charged in a vicious rush, hoping to smash Melody back against the hotel desk.

Melody whirled aside from the brutal impact and his fists sledged out. There were two jarring thuds and Maddock stumbled sideways. He went to his knees and bounded up, roaring, mighty fists driving furiously. He was fighting with the desperation of a man who sees his whole empire crumbling, using boots and elbows with vicious intent to kill or maim. Melody was staggered by the sheer violence of the attack that beat down his guard and rocked his senses with sledge-hammer blows.

Melody dodged a vicious swing and slugged at Maddock's jaw. The big man reeled and Melody struck again. Maddock cast one frantic, frightened glance around and then lunged desperately for Melody's gun belt, still hanging from the bannister. He got his hands on it and was jerking the gun free when Melody's smashing dive caught Maddock around the middle. Maddock crashed through the railing and onto his back on the stairs and Melody, following, drove rights and lefts into the battered face with all the strength at his command.

He saw Maddock's eyes roll up and close and the big man went limp, rolling down the steps to a battered heap on the floor. Melody straightened, panting, and saw that the fight was over.

He turned, shaking his head to clear it and for the first time he saw that the tiny lobby was jammed with men. For a moment he thought they were Maddock's gunmen and then his eyes cleared. These were no hired killers but the men of Owl Hoot and the surrounding ranges, cattlemen and storekeepers, young and old.

A bearded rancher stepped forward. "Son, you've done a thing that needed doing for more than a year. So have we. Maddock's gunmen are locked up under guard, to await trial as soon as we can assemble a court. They had us buffaloed until you showed us what a man with courage can do. We'll take charge of Maddock, now. He'll not be the boss of Owl Hoot any longer. Thanks to you and your Mexican friend, we've got our town back."

Suddenly a figure burst through the crowd and soft arms were around Melody's neck again. "I saw it all," Jennie Tobin whispered. "I was so frightened until Pedro spoke from the window and made

them lay down their guns. Then I saw fear in Mike Maddock's eyes when he faced you and I knew none of us would ever have to live in the shadows again."

"You were afraid, Senorita?" Pedro said, coming forward. "If you hear one little tinkling sound, it is the chunks of ice in my veins beginning to thaw out."

Melody looked deep into Jennie's misted eyes and read there the message of promise and sweet anticipation. Stay here, her eyes pleaded. Here is the end of the rainbow for the wanderer, a home and love, respect and security. This is your town now, Melody Ames. Maddock ruled it with fear and brutality. You can guide it with dignity and honor. The town is yours—and so am I.

"Amigo," Pedro said softly, "there is a matter that disturbs my soul. That rascally stablekeeper was one of Maddock's tools. We placed your horse, Prairie, and my beautiful mule, Rosita, in his keeping last night."

"You're right," Melody said. "We'd better check on them right now. Come on."

"Will you come back, Melody Ames?" Jennie asked. "Will you be back here or will you ride away?"

It came to Melody suddenly that both Pedro and Jennie were waiting for his answer. His lean face tightened. "I don't know yet, little Jennie," he said quietly. "It's a thing I'll decide as I walk."

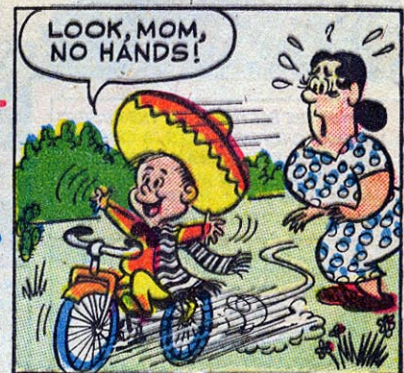
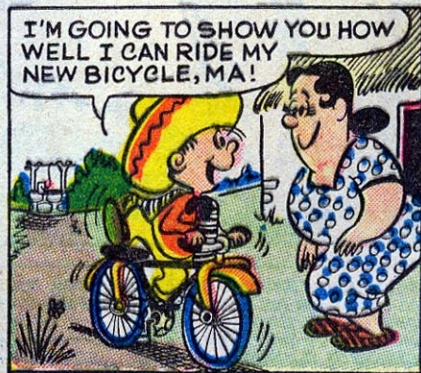
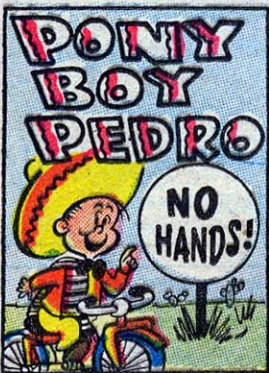
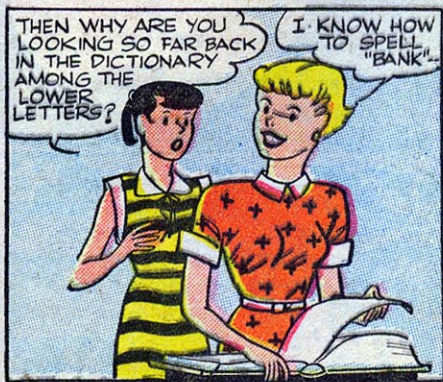
One of the townsmen was guarding the stable when they got there. Rosita brayed a noisy welcome to Pedro and Prairie nickered softly, nosing Melody's shoulder. Outside the window, the dawn was breaking over the distant mountains, touching the thin line of the far trail with mystery and promise. Somewhere a rooster crowed and a lark rose, singing.

Without speaking, Melody reached for Prairie's saddle. In silence the two mounted and rode out onto the still-dark street. Down the block a rectangle of light showed the open door of the Owl Hoot hotel and silhouetted the figure of Jennie Tobin, waiting on the porch.

MELODY SAT for a moment, looking up the straight road to love and then he twitched the reins and turned Prairie's head to the north. In silence, Pedro rode behind. Then Melody's sweet voice rose in song, a song of the open trails and the far reaches of the frontier, of man's loneliness and hope. At the edge of town he looked back once. The hotel door was closed. Jennie Tobin had heard the song and she no longer waited on the porch.

THE END

COWBOY LOVE



The Hermit's Daughter

The grim and silent hills of the west held many a strange secret, Buck knew. But when he learned the story of the hating, embittered old man and the beautiful girl, he found the strangest story of them all ... and with it, the key to the gates of happiness!



DEEP IN THE FASTNESS OF THE RUGGED, UNTAMED CHEYENNE HILLS, A CRYSTAL-CLEAR MOUNTAIN STREAM TUMBLED AND THREADED ITS WAY THROUGH THE ROCKS. THE SMALL, HARBY BURRO OF A PROSPECTOR HALTED BESIDE IT ...

THIS IS GOOD WATER FOR DRINKING. WE'LL BE RESTING HERE A SPELL.



BUCK LANNISTON BRUSHED THE TRAIL DUST FROM HIS CLOTHES AND FEASTED HIS EYES HUNGRILY UPON THE FRESH COOLNESS OF THE WATER.

AND I'M THINKING THIS'LL BE A GOOD SPOT TO WASH MY DUDS. PROSPECTING GIVES A MAN PLENTY OF DUST, BUT NOT ENOUGH OF ITS GOLD.



AND SOON, BUCK WAS WASHING HIS CLOTHES IN THE MOUNTAIN STREAM, WHEN SUDDENLY HE HEARD A LOW GROWL ...

GRRR--OOOF!

HEY, YOU CRITTER! GET AWAY FROM THOSE BRITCHES!



COWBOY LOVE



THE ECHO OF THE SHOT HAD NOT YET DIED AWAY WHEN BUCK HEARD THE VOICE SPEAK SHARPLY, COMMANDINGLY!

HE LOOKED UP TO SEE A GIRL STANDING THERE, A GIRL MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN HE WOULD HAVE BELIEVED EXISTED.



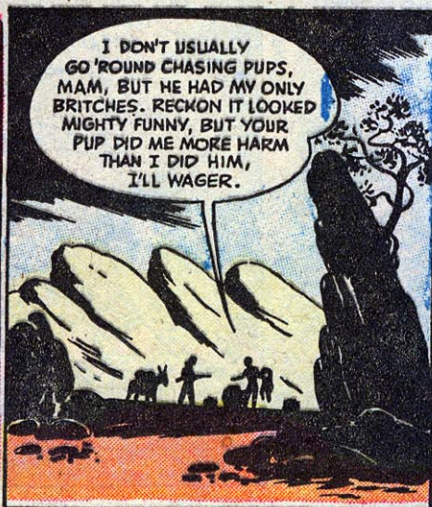
SURE THING, MAM. THERE!... NOW YOU CAN POINT THAT RIFLE AWAY BEFORE IT GOES OFF!

NOT EVEN THE ROUGH WORKING CLOTHES SHE WORE COULD DISGUISE THE SLIM BEAUTY OF HER FIGURE. THOUGH HER FACE WAS FINELY CHISELED, WITH A STRONG DELICACY, HER EXPRESSION, AS SHE GAZED STEADILY AT BUCK, REMAINED AS STERN AND FORBIDDING AS THE GRIM HILLS!



BUCK'S FRIENDLY TONE FELL UPON APPARENTLY DEAF EARS, FOR THE GIRL CONTINUED TO WATCH HIM, GRIMLY UNSMILING.

BUCK FOUND HIMSELF WONDERING WHAT HIDDEN DEPTHS LAY BEHIND THOSE DARK, UNFATHOMABLE EYES—



I DON'T USUALLY GO 'ROUND CHASING PUPS, MAM, BUT HE HAD MY ONLY BRITCHES. RECKON IT LOOKED MIGHTY FUNNY, BUT YOUR PUP DID ME MORE HARM THAN I DID HIM, I'LL WAGER.



NOW, I ASK YOU, MAM. DO YOU CALL THAT A SOCIABLE THING FOR A DOG TO DO? I'M GOING TO BE FEELING MIGHTY DRAFTY IN THESE BRITCHES!

THEN, SUDDENLY, THE GIRL SMILED, AND IT WAS LIKE THE MAGICAL APPEARANCE OF A RAINBOW AT THE STORM'S END. HER LAUGHTER, THAT FOLLOWED WAS CLEAR AND PRETTY AS THE STREAM THAT RIPPLED ALONG BESIDE THEM—



I—I'M SORRY, BUT I CAN'T HELP LAUGHING! YOU'RE RIGHT. SIXGUN DID TAKE A BIG PIECE. I'M SORRY... BUT IT'S STILL FUNNY!

WELL, NOW, THAT'S MUCH BETTER. I WAS BEGINNING TO THINK YOU DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO SMILE.



YOU'RE EVEN MORE BEAUTIFUL WHEN YOU SMILE, IF THAT'S POSSIBLE. WHAT'S A GIRL LIKE YOU DOING WAY UP HERE IN THESE HILLS, ALONE?

I'M NOT REALLY ALONE. I LIVE WITH MY FATHER IN A CABIN UP ON THE RIDGE. I'VE LIVED HERE ALL MY LIFE. MOTHER DIED WHEN I WAS JUST A LITTLE GIRL.

AND IN A MOMENT... WELL, NOW I FEEL A MITE MORE DECENT. MY NAME'S BUCK LANNISTON. I'VE BEEN PROSPECTING.

I'M NANCY RODGERS. WE DON'T MEET MANY FOLKS -- PA DOESN'T LIKE PEOPLE!

BUT I DO FEEL TO BLAME, SORT OF, FOR SIXGUN'S TEARING YOUR TROUSERS! IF YOU COME BACK TO THE CABIN WITH ME NOW, I'LL SEW A PATCH ON THEM FOR YOU, MISTER.

THAT'D BE RIGHT NICE OF YOU, NANCY. I'LL TAKE YOU UP ON THAT. AND I'D ALSO HANKER FOR YOU TO CALL ME BUCK.

NANCY LOOKED UP AT THE TALL MAN SMILING DOWN AT HER, AND IN THE HONEST FRIENDLINESS OF HIS EYES, THE WARMTH OF HIS SMILE, SHE SUDDENLY FELT A STRANGE, NEW GLOW IN HER HEART.

ALL--ALL RIGHT... BUCK!



BUCK WATCHED THIS QUIET, SERIOUS, BEAUTIFUL GIRL AS HE WALKED UP THE NARROW PATH BESIDE HER.

FINDING HER IN THE WILD HILLS HAD BEEN LIKE FINDING A PRECIOUS LODE OF GOLD.

THEY FINALLY CAME TO A NARROW RIDGE, AND ---



THERE'S THE CABIN UP AHEAD.

YOUR DAD SURE PICKED HIMSELF A LONELY SPOT TO LIVE.

BUT SUDDENLY---



CRACK!

TARNATION! I'M GETTING TO BE A REGULAR TARGET 'ROUND HERE! NOW WHAT??



GET OFF MY LAND, YOU! START TACKIN' OUT OF HERE! AND YOU, NANCY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH THIS CRITTER? YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT PEOPLE COMING HERE!

NOW, WAIT, PA, TAKE IT EASY! LET ME EXPLAIN!

EXPLAIN, NOTHIN'! YOU KNOW I'D RATHER TRUST A POLECAT WITH MY SUNDAY LINEN THAN A HUMAN BEING. GET THIS COYOTE OFF HERE!

NOW, PA! I KNOW HOW YOU FEEL, BUT SIXGUN TORE THIS FELLOW'S TROUSERS AND I RECKONED IT WAS ONLY RIGHT TO FIX THEM UP FOR HIM!

NANCY STOOD FIRM, AND BUCK SAW THE OLD MAN HESITATE, AND THEN, GRUMBLING, TURN AWAY.

NANCY'S EYES MET BUCK'S FOR AN INSTANT, AND THEN SHE TURNED ASIDE...

BUT NOT BEFORE HE HAD SEEN THE GLADNESS MIRRORRED THERE---



WELL, ALL RIGHT, NANCY. BUT THEN SEND HIM A-PACKING! I'LL BE BEHIND THE CABIN, CHOPPING AWAY AT THAT BIG OAK, IF YOU NEED ME.

THANKS, PA. COME ON, BUCK.

I'M SORRY, BUCK, BUT PA HATES PEOPLE. THAT'S WHY WE LIVE OUT HERE, ALONE, AWAY FROM OTHER HUMANS. IT'S THE WAY PA WANTS IT. I'LL EXPLAIN IT WHILE I SEW YOUR PATCH ON.

YES, I'D BE INTERESTED TO HEAR IT, NANCY. I'LL JUST TIE MY BURRO OUT HERE.

AND SO, SOON AFTER, INSIDE THE LITTLE CABIN, BUCK LISTENED TO NANCY'S STORY, AND HIS HEART WENT OUT TO THIS BEAUTIFUL, SERIOUS GIRL WHO HADN'T LAUGHED ENOUGH ---

PA'S A PROSPECTOR, TOO! YEARS AGO SOME MEN POSING AS HIS FRIENDS CHEATED HIM OUT OF A GOOD CLAIM AND HE WASN'T ABLE TO PROVE HIS RIGHT TO IT...



COWBOY LOVE



IT WASN'T HARD TO SYMPATHIZE WITH THE OLD MAN, EVEN THOUGH HIS ATTITUDE WAS UNREASONABLE AND FILLED WITH MISDIRECTED HATRED. BUT BUCK'S THOUGHTS WERE OF NANCY. WHAT OF HER? WHAT HAD THIS DIET OF EMBITTERED DISTRUST DONE TO HER YOUNG AND WARM HEART?



NANCY TRIED TO THINK OF ALL HER FATHER HAD TOLD HER OF PEOPLE... HOW MEAN AND SMALL THEY WERE. BUT NOW, AS SHE LOOKED INTO BUCK'S EYES, SHE COULD HEAR ONLY THE POUNDING OF HER HEART AND THINK ONLY ONE THING---



BUT JUST THEN, THE CRASHING THUD OF A FALLING TREE WAS HEARD, QUICKLY FOLLOWED BY A CRY OF PAIN. BUCK SAW THE FRIGHT LEAP INTO NANCY'S EYES, AS---



COWBOY LOVE



BUCK LET THE OLD MAN'S RANTING GO UNHEEDED, AND BENDING HIS BODY LOW, HE USED EVERY LAST OUNCE OF HIS SINEWY MUSCLES TO RAISE THE TREE ENOUGH FOR NANCY TO PULL HER FATHER FREE. AND THEN---



BUT IN A MINUTE, BUCK HAD THE INJURED MAN INSIDE THE CABIN. PAINFUL AS THE BROKEN LEG WAS, THE OLD MAN'S FEELING TOWARD PEOPLE, A DEEP AND BITTER THING BORN OF TOO MANY YEARS OF HATING, WAS EVER-PRESENT IN HIS WORD AND GLANCE...



COWBOY LOVE

TAKING ADVANTAGE OF THE OLD MAN'S UNCONSCIOUSNESS AND HIS ACCOMPANYING FREEDOM FROM PAIN, BUCK QUICKLY AND SKILFULLY SET THE LEG. FINALLY ---

THERE -- THAT DOES IT! THAT OLD DRESS OF YOURS ISN'T MUCH OF A BANDAGE, BUT IT'LL HAVE TO DO!

THANKS FOR WHAT YOU'VE DONE. BUT NOW YOU'D BETTER LEAVE.

LEAVE?

THAT'S RIGHT! DAD TAUGHT ME THAT NO ONE EVER DOES ANYTHING KIND EXCEPT WHEN THEY'RE EXPECTING SOMETHING BETTER IN RETURN. FOLKS ARE ALL SELFISH THAT WAY!

THAT'S NOT SO, NANCY. YOUR PA'S WRONG ABOUT THAT.

NOW THAT YOU'VE DONE SOMETHING FOR US, I DON'T AIM TO LET YOU STAY AROUND AND GET PAID BACK. THAT'S WHAT'S ON YOUR MIND, I'LL WAGER, JUST AS PA ALWAYS TOLD ME.

NO, NANCY... FOLKS DON'T ALWAYS DO THINGS EXPECTING TO BE PAID BACK FOR WHATEVER THEY DO.

BUCK SAW THAT THE LONG YEARS OF HATE-FILLED TEACHING WAS EXACTING A SERIOUS TOLL. IT WAS TURNING LOVELY NANCY INTO A SUSPICIOUS, BELLIGERENT CARBON OF HER FATHER. BUT THERE WAS ONE THING HE'D WANTED TO DO SINCE HE'D FIRST SAW HER, AND ---

YOU'RE WRONG, NANCY...

S-STAY BACK... STOP...!

YOU'RE LOVELY, NANCY...!

OH...!

NANCY STARTED TO PULL AWAY. BUT, AS BUCK'S LIPS MET HERS, HIS STRONG ARMS PRESSING HER TIGHTLY TO HIM, SHE FOUND SHE DIDN'T WANT TO PULL AWAY...

THERE -- NOW WE'RE EVEN, NANCY. THAT WAS MY PAYMENT! AND NOW, GOODBYE!

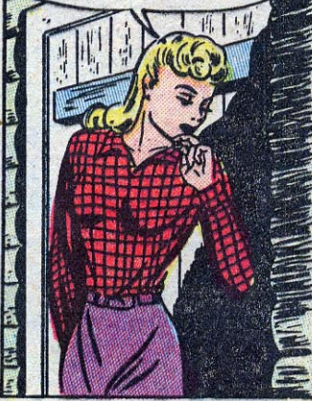
COWBOY LOVE

NANCY'S HEAD WAS SPINNING. WHILE INSIDE HER, THAT WONDERFUL, WARM, HAPPY GLOW CLASHED WITH THE COLD BITTERNESS OF HER FATHER'S TEACHINGS...

OH... SOB!



OH, WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH ME... SOB? WHY--WHY-- I SHOULDN'T BE CRYING LIKE A BABY JUST BE-CAUSE HE KISSED ME... SOB!



ANYWAY, HE'S GONE NOW. I--I TOLD HIM TO GO. TH-THAT'S WHAT I WANTED!



BUT I... I... OH, I DIDN'T REALLY WANT HIM TO LEAVE... SOB! I --SOB--I WANTED HIM TO ST-STAY!



NANCY'S SOB'S SHOOK HER SLIM BODY AND SHE DID NOT HEAR THE CABIN DOOR OPEN.

BUT AT THE SOUND OF THE VOICE BEHIND HER, HER HEART LEAPED AND SHE SPUN AROUND TO SEE---

OH, BUCK! YOU--YOU DIDN'T GO!

I STARTED TO, BUT I COULDN'T. I KNOW YOU'LL NEED HELP HERE, AT LEAST... NO MATTER WHAT YOU SAY! AND I'M GLAD I CAME BACK, BECAUSE I HEARD WHAT YOU SAID JUST NOW!



DID YOU MEAN THAT, NANCY... ABOUT NOT REALLY HAVING WANTED ME TO GO?

OH, YES, BUCK--YES! THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I'VE CRIED SINCE I WAS A LITTLE GIRL!



AND AS THEY LOOKED INTO EACH OTHERS EYES, THEIR HEARTS MET IN THE SILENCE OF THE LITTLE CABIN...

I'M GLAD, NANCY. IT'S ONLY WHEN THE HEART IS TOUCHED THAT TEARS COME.

YES, BUCK--- YES!



COWBOY LOVE



BUCK -- IT'S PA.
HE'S WAKING
UP!

OOOOOH ---
OOOOOH!



NO, NANCY --- HE'S
RUNNING A FEVER,
AND IT LOOKS LIKE
A HIGH ONE. IT
MIGHT BE THE
SHOCK, OR
MAYBE AN
INFECTION
IN THE LEG.

OH, BUCK! IT'S
DUSK OUTSIDE.
WE COULD
NEVER GET A
DOCTOR UP HERE
IN THE DARK.



YOU'RE RIGHT. WE'LL HAVE
TO DO WHAT WE CAN OUR-
SELVES. GET ME SOME WATER
AND SOME CLOTHS. WE MUST
TRY TO KEEP THE
FEVER DOWN.

AND SO,
AS NIGHT
ENVELOPED
THE LAST
THREAD OF
DAYLIGHT
AND WOVE A
PATTERN OF
DEEP PURPLE
ACROSS THE
SILENT HILLS,
A LAMP BURNED
STEADILY
IN THE LITTLE
CABIN.
BUCK WORKED
AND STOOD
WATCH OVER
THE OLD MAN---



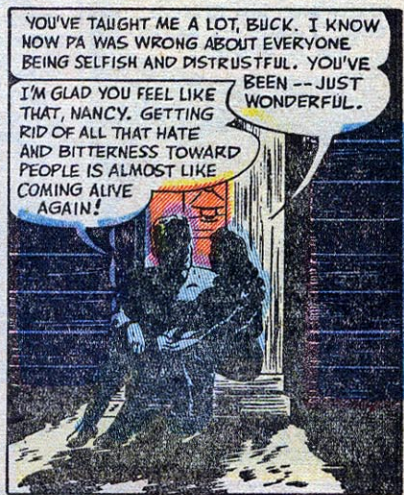
REFILL THE PITCHER WITH
FRESH WATER, NANCY. WE'LL
NEED LOTS MORE COMPRESSES.
THE FEVER'S STILL HIGH.
HE'S HALF-
DELIRIOUS.

OOOHH...

FAR INTO
THE NIGHT
BUCK
CONTINUED
TO WORK OVER
NANCY'S FATHER
WHILE SHE STOOD
BY HELPING HIM
AS BEST SHE
COULD.

BUT NOW THEY
COULD ONLY WAIT
AND HOPE FOR
THE BEST.

DURING THE LONG
HOURS OF THEIR
VIGIL, NANCY
UNDERSTOOD
THE TEARS
SHE'D SHED
WHEN SHE SENT
BUCK AWAY---



YOU'VE TAUGHT ME A LOT, BUCK. I KNOW
NOW PA WAS WRONG ABOUT EVERYONE
BEING SELFISH AND DISTRUSTFUL. YOU'VE
BEEN -- JUST
WONDERFUL.

I'M GLAD YOU FEEL LIKE
THAT, NANCY. GETTING
RID OF ALL THAT HATE
AND BITTERNESS TOWARD
PEOPLE IS ALMOST LIKE
COMING ALIVE
AGAIN!

AS OFTEN
HAPPENS, WHEN
TWO PEOPLE
EXPERIENCE A
GRAVE ORDEAL
TOGETHER,
HOPING, WORKING,
PRAYING AS
ONE ... THEY
GROW TO
KNOW EACH
OTHER'S
HEARTS, AND
THEY SPAN
TIME WITH
SEVEN-LEAGUE
BOOTS. SO IT
WAS WITH BUCK
AND NANCY---



NANCY, IF I'D KNOWN
YOU A HUNDRED YEARS,
I COULDN'T CARE ANY MORE
FOR YOU THAN
I DO NOW.

OH, BUCK ---
I CARE FOR
YOU, TOO!



NANCY, MY
DARLING -- YOU'RE
WONDERFUL.

THIS IS MORE
THAN I EVER
HOPED FOR!

COWBOY LOVE

AND THIS TIME, AS NANCY'S LIPS FOUND BUCK'S, SHE KNEW NO TEARS WOULD FOLLOW THIS KISS. HER HEART HAD FOUND ITS PLACE. AND TO BUCK, THIS WARM, VIBRANT GIRL WAS THE ELUSIVE DREAM HE HAD PURSUED OVER MANY A TRAIL---

OH, DARLING, I WANT TO GET TO KNOW FOLKS AGAIN... TO LEARN TO BELIEVE AND TRUST...

YES, NANCY-- THERE'S A LOT AHEAD FOR THE BOTH OF US, BUT NOW WE MUST THINK ONLY OF PULLING YOUR PA THROUGH!

THEN, FINALLY, SLOWLY, A NEW DAY DAWNED OVER THE LITTLE CABIN, AND...

THE FEVER'S GONE, NANCY! WE'VE PULLED HIM THROUGH! HE'S BEEN SLEEPING NORMALLY NOW FOR THE LAST FEW HOURS.

NOT WE, BUCK. IT WAS YOU WHO DID IT.

DAD HAS SOME NETS DOWN AT THE POND. I'LL GO DOWN AND BRING BACK SOME FISH FOR BREAKFAST. YOU MUST BE FAMISHED, BUCK.

SWELL, NANCY, THOUGH I CAN'T FIGURE WHICH I NEED MOST-- SLEEP OR VITTLES. I'LL STAY AND KEEP AN EYE ON YOUR PA.

NANCY HAD BEEN GONE ONLY A FEW MINUTES WHEN QUIETLY, THE OLD MAN CAME OUT OF HIS SLEEP. SLOWLY, HIS EYES FOCUSED UPON BUCK, BENDING OVER THE BED ACROSS FROM HIM. IMMEDIATELY, BUT ONE THOUGHT LEAPED INTO HIS SUSPICIOUS MIND---

THAT VARMINT'S HERE YET... AND HE'S AFTER OUR MONEY! HE'S FOUND OUT WHERE IT IS!

GET AWAY FROM THAT MONEY, YOU BANGTAILED HORSE-THIEF!

UUUUU!

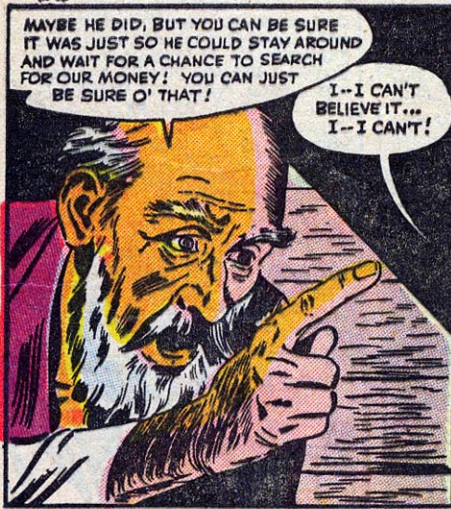
NANCY, THERE YOU BE! I TOLD YOU TO SEND THAT CRITTER PACKING!

BUCK--! OH, PA--- WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?

I KNOCKED HIM OUT, THAT'S WHAT I DID. CAUGHT HIM GOING THROUGH THE BED WHERE WE KEEP OUR MONEY! HE WAS GONNA ROB US!

OH, NO, PA! NOT BUCK! HE SAVED YOUR LIFE! HE NURSED YOU ALL THROUGH THE NIGHT, HALTED THE FEVER AND INFECTION!

COWBOY LOVE



MAYBE HE DID, BUT YOU CAN BE SURE IT WAS JUST SO HE COULD STAY AROUND AND WAIT FOR A CHANCE TO SEARCH FOR OUR MONEY! YOU CAN JUST BE SURE O' THAT!

I--I CAN'T BELIEVE IT...
I--I CAN'T!

NANCY'S MIND RACED. HAD HER FATHER'S DISBELIEF IN OTHERS BEEN RIGHT ALL ALONG?

BUCK HADN'T HAD A CHANCE BEFORE THIS TO BE ALONE IN THE CABIN.

BUT, AS SHE THOUGHT, SHE HEARD THE VOICE OF HER HEART, AND---



NO---I WON'T BELIEVE IT! IT'S NOT TRUE! BUCK'S GOOD, AND KIND AND UNSELFISH!

BAH!



JUST THEN, AT THE SOUND OF BUCK'S VOICE, NANCY TURNED TO SEE HIM GETTING TO HIS FEET---

TH--THANKS FOR DEFENDING ME, NANCY. I WASN'T STEALING YOUR MONEY. ALL I WAS DOING WAS RIPPING OFF STRIPS OF SHEET FOR FRESH BANDAGES FOR THAT LEG.

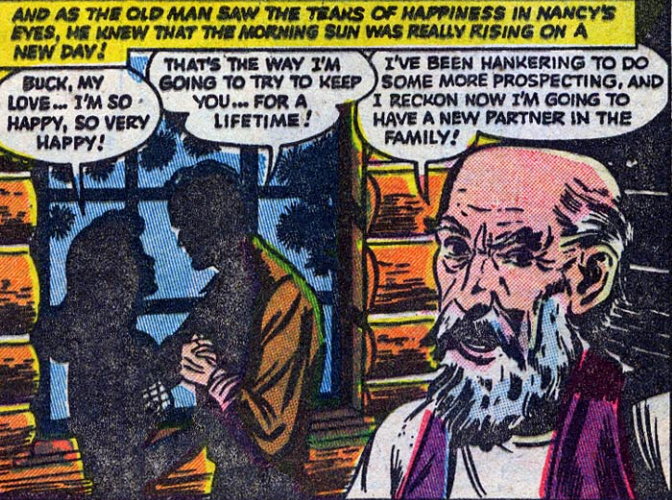
NO, THAT'S WRONG... I SEE THAT, NOW, AND I'M GLAD. LIVING UP HERE, ALONE AND BITTER, THE WAY I HAVE, HASN'T BEEN FAIR TO NANCY. HERE'S MY HAND, SON... YOU'VE SHOWN ME A LOT.



SEE---HERE'S THE PROOF, IF YOU STILL NEED IT.

WHY, I--I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY--- I JUST DON'T!

BUCK, DARLING...



AND AS THE OLD MAN SAW THE TEARS OF HAPPINESS IN NANCY'S EYES, HE KNEW THAT THE MORNING SUN WAS REALLY RISING ON A NEW DAY!

BUCK, MY LOVE... I'M SO HAPPY, SO VERY HAPPY!

THAT'S THE WAY I'M GOING TO TRY TO KEEP YOU... FOR A LIFETIME!

I'VE BEEN HANKERING TO DO SOME MORE PROSPECTING, AND I RECKON NOW I'M GOING TO HAVE A NEW PARTNER IN THE FAMILY!

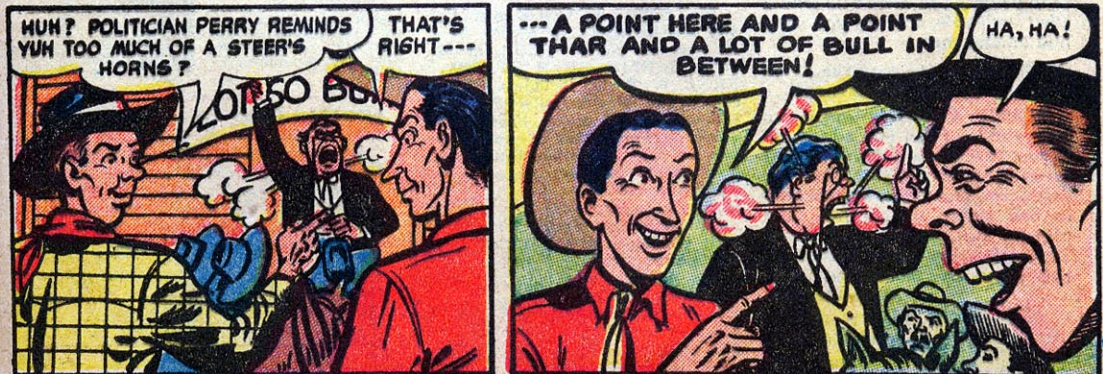
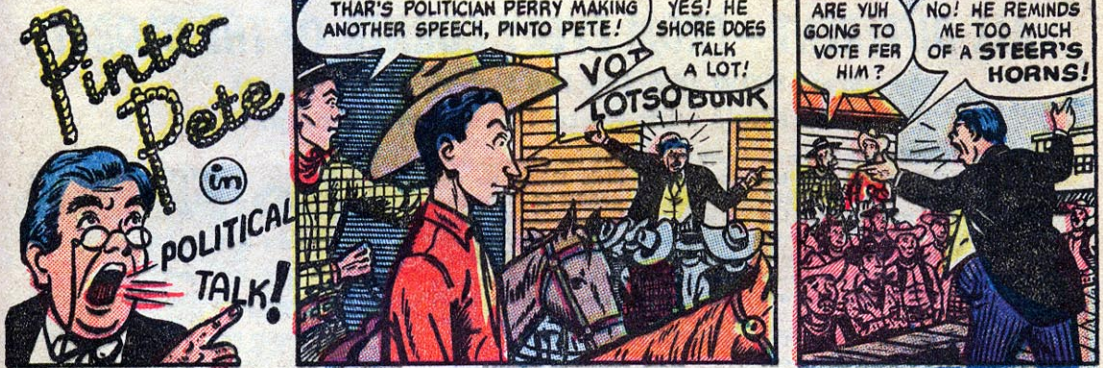
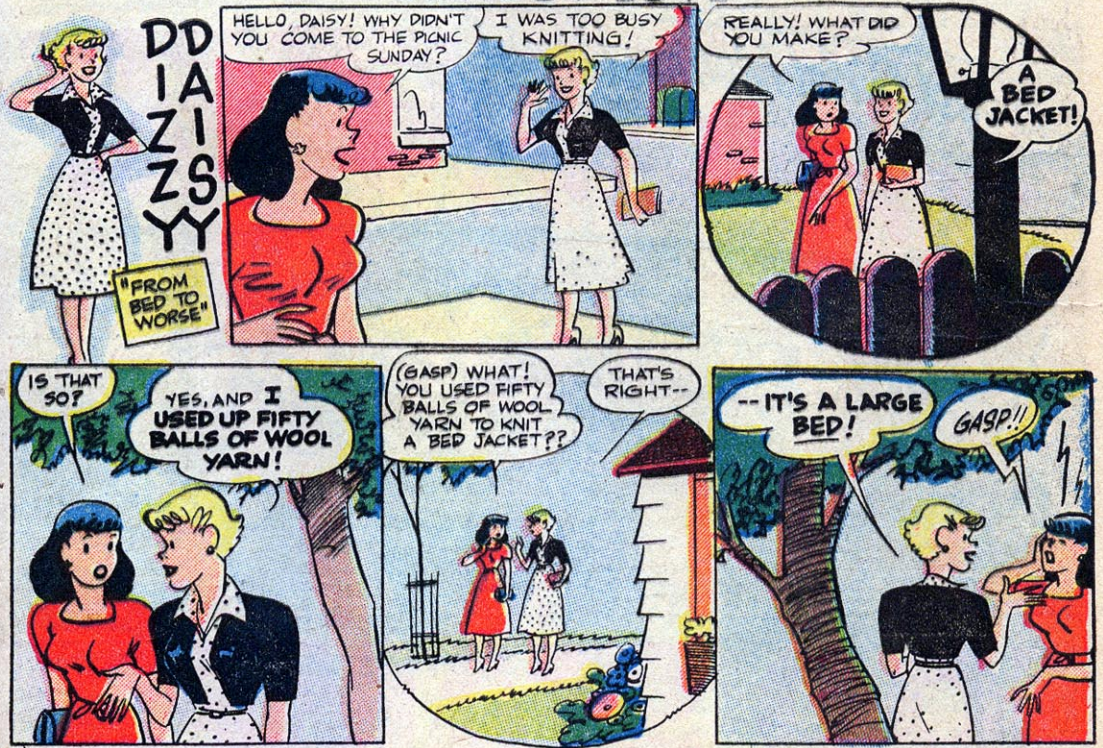


THE OLD MAN WAS SILENT FOR A LONG MOMENT AND THEN, HUMBLLY, WITH THE HONESTY THAT WAS A DEEP-ROOTED PART OF HIM, HE FACED BUCK AND NANCY---

RECKON I OWE YOU A MIGHTY BIG APOLOGY AND A HEAP OF THANKS, SON. AND MAYBE... MAYBE ALL THESE YEARS I'VE BEEN KIND OF UNJUST TO PEOPLE.

I'M AFRAID YOU HAVE. YOU CAN'T JUDGE ALL FOLKS JUST BY A FEW BAD ONES.

COWBOY LOVE



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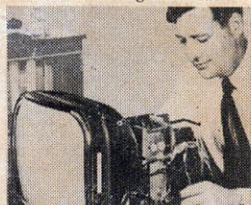
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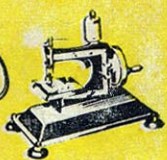
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